

Staying Positive – Managing Worry

With all the uncertainty and changeability in the current situation with Covid- 19 it is natural to worry about the impact it may have on us and our loved ones. Not knowing what will happen, how long it will last, how we will manage financially, if ourselves or our loved ones get sick alongside the general worries we carry around with ourselves can leave us feeling unsettled, stressed and anxious. These worries can feel overwhelming and all- encompassing. It is natural to struggle with all this uncertainty and it is important to treat ourselves and others with care and compassion.

Given the current circumstances it is normal to experience periods of;

- **Anger**
- **Sadness** (especially around the **loss** of what you would usually be able to do)
- **Frustration**
- **Loneliness**
- **Confusion**
- **Anxiety, worry or panic**
- **Difficulty sleeping or concentrating**
- **Excessive worry or hyper-vigilance** about our **health**
- **Helplessness**
- Feeling or becoming **socially withdrawn**.

Setting up a good routine can help to mitigate some of this through supporting a sense of purpose and identity, adding a sense of predictability in the face of uncertainty, allowing us to focus on daily tasks rather than what may or may not happen and a sense of control. It is important that the routine includes contact with others, allows you to gain a sense of achievement, includes pleasurable and enjoyable activities and ways to stay active/ get exercise. However this on its own may not be enough to help us keep all the worry and anxiety at bay.

What is worry and why do we do it?

We all experience worry at times as we all have the ability to think ahead, this allows us to plan for the future, anticipate and solve problems as well as allowing us to achieve our goals. The down side to this ability is we can not see into the future and anticipate every eventuality which can leave us anxious and apprehensive about an unknown or uncertain situation which is difficult to plan for. Worry is a form of thinking ahead but when there is so much uncertainty and confusion it can become overwhelming and leave us focusing increasingly on worst case scenarios leaving us panicked and fearful around how we may cope with them.

When we worry it can be like a stream of thoughts or images which can progress into increasingly catastrophic and unlikely directions. For some people this can feel uncontrollable. For example;

‘I have a headache’ leads to ‘What if its Corona virus?’ leads to ‘What if I have passed it on to everyone I saw yesterday?’ leads to ‘What if they all pass it on and people die?’ leads to ‘What if I loose everyone I know and love?’

As we can see this change of thinking contains many ‘What if. . .’ scenarios which are out of our control. There are essentially two different types of worry:

- **Hypothetical worry.** This is where our abilities to be able to plan ahead and worry is unhelpful resulting in what is sometimes called catastrophic thinking where we focus on the worse case scenario. The example above is this type of thinking. It is out of our control, we can not do anything about it (other than taking sensible precautions) as the problem we are worrying about does not yet exist.
- **Real problem worry.** This is where our ability to worry and plan ahead is helpful allowing us to solve the real problems we are faced with right now. The problem we are worrying about needs dealing with and can be dealt with now. Such as ‘the children are now off school and I need help with childcare.’ This is not a ‘What if. . .’ scenario it is a real one which can and needs to be addressed.

Even when things are going well we often experience hypothetical worry (‘What if it all goes wrong’) and worrying about things to some degree is completely normal. There are even more common triggers for worry than usual at the moment. This includes;

- **Ambiguity.** When we are not sure what to do for the best, the guidance we are receiving is open to interpretation and we are uncertain of the best way forward.
- **Novelty.** This situation is completely new (and unexpected) we have no experience to fall back on to help us manage, understand or navigate the situation.
- **Unpredictability.** Things in this country (and the world) have changed dramatically within the last few days. It is unclear and uncertain what will happen next and how long it will last.

So no wonder we are all feeling worried about the situation! A certain level of worry is normal and even helpful however when this gets out of control it can become a problem.

- **Normal worry** can help us problem solve, achieve goals and get the outcomes we hope for.
- **Excessive worry** gets in the way of us doing what we want/ need to do and live the life we want to lead. This leads us to feel demoralised, exhausted and upset. This is where worry becomes problematic.

What can we do about worrying?

While it is completely normal to feel some levels of worry at the moment if that worry becomes excessive or problematic (such as if it is interrupting sleep patterns, which in turn will effect how we are able to function, or leading to high levels of anxiety) it may be useful to find ways to manage and limit the time we spend worrying and take steps to improve our sense of well-being. This is important for our own well-being and mental health but is equally important for our children's well-being and mental health.

Children are also facing massive interruptions to their usual routines and social encounters and are experiencing triggers for worries (see above) and may need extra support and reassurance around this. If they are seeing the parent worrying excessively they will pick up on it and become more worried themselves. Depending on the age of the child they may or may not be able to communicate these feelings of worry verbally, it may be expressed through challenging or worrying behaviours. These will essentially be likely to be fear based responses designed to either keep people (and worry) away or an attempt to create feelings of safety, stability and even control. *

In order to support our children and help them to manage their worries and concerns we need to be able to understand and manage our own to a certain degree. Self care in this situation is vital along with compassion and kindness toward ourselves and others. Some of the strategies, ideas and activities outlined below are tools which we can use to manage our own worries and support our children to do this also.

- **Maintaining a balanced routine** this should include getting up, going to bed and meal times at the same time. It should also include physical activity, time to connect with others, activities which bring pleasure and enjoyment, activities which bring a sense of achievement and satisfaction and activities which can help distract from worry.
- **Practice identifying if it is a real problem or a hypothetical one** using something such as a worry tree (see worry tree additional sheet) to help you identify the type of worry which is being experienced. If many of the worries are hypothetical it is useful to remind yourself that these are not problems which can be solved right now and find ways of letting them go by focusing on something else (distraction) or the problems/ worries which can be

solved. This may take a little practice in becoming aware of these thoughts, identifying them and finding ways to let them go. Worry trees can be useful to use with children as well to aid their understanding of how to differentiate between the two. It may be that the hypothetical worrying thoughts can be written down and physically put away into worry box, or disposed of in some way.

- **Practice postponing your worry.** Worry is often nagging and insistent and makes us feel as though we need to do something about it NOW even when this isn't possible or practical. By practising postponing a hypothetical worry we can form a different relationship with it and not become all consumed by it. This means setting a specific time each day to worry and put off thinking about the hypothetical worry until it is official worry time. This takes some practise but can be very effective.
 1. **Preparation.** Identify a specific time each day to set aside for worrying and work out how long this will be for. To work this at it may be useful to identify what time of day will you be in the best frame of mind for attending to your worries and when are you most likely not to be disturbed. Set a period of 15-30 minutes at this time to worry. You may need a little trial and error to find what works best for you.
 2. **Worry postponement.** When worries surface during the day decide if they are real or hypothetical, if they are hypothetical they can be postponed until your worry time. You may wish to write them down and physically put them in a worry box to be looked at during your worry time and then put away again. It may also be useful to redirect your attention to the present moment through using things such as ; a basic breathing exercise(close your eyes and breath in for 4 slow counts pushing your stomach out as you breath in then slowly breath out for 4 whilst keeping your shoulders relaxed), closing your eyes and becoming aware of the different things you can hear, smell, feel (try to find 5 things) or through exercises such as finding 5 red objects in the room in 1 minute. It may also be useful to actually tell yourself 'I am not going to engage with this worry now, I will engage with this worry later.'
 3. **Worry time.** Use your official worry time for worrying. If you have written down your hypothetical worries during the day it may be useful to consider if they still feel as pressing and relevant; do they give the same emotional response as they did earlier in the day? How concerning are you finding them now? Can any of them be converted into practical problems which may have a solution? (For Example 'I am worried about catching the virus and dying from it therefore I will take practical steps to keep myself as safe as possible such as excellent hand hygiene and social distancing' you can then remind yourself that you are taking all

the practical and sensible precautions you can to keep yourself safe when the worry tries to resurface). It is important to use the worry time even if there is not much to worry about as it helps you get used to managing worry in this way so it can become more of a habit.

- **Be kind and compassionate towards yourself.** This involves writing the worry down and finding a new and compassionate way of responding to the worry. This is a well known technique often use in therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapies. (see challenging your thoughts with compassion additional work sheet).
- **Being Mindful.** I am sure we have all heard of mindfulness and for many people the techniques involved can be a really useful to bring us back to the present moment and allow us to let go of worries. There are many ways of doing this such as practising mindful meditation, mindful techniques such as those suggested in ‘postponing worry’ section as well as mindful activities or ways of being mindful in our daily activities. There are many books, websites and apps for both adults and children on mindfulness so I will not go into further detail here.

Worry and our bodies

Worry does not just effect our brains, when it becomes excessive we feel it in our bodies too. The physical effects of worry can be;

- **Muscle tension** which can lead to **aches** and **pains**. We do not always realise when our muscles are tensed with worry. It can be useful at times throughout the day when we have been feeling tense to practice tensing and realising different muscle groups such as our shoulders, arms, hands, legs and feet.
- **Restlessness or inability to relax.** Physical activity, especially in short intense bursts, can be helpful to burn off the excessive anxious energy and also releases endorphins (brain chemicals) which help promote feelings of well-being. This could include running/ jogging, weight lifting, running on the spot, star jumps, skipping etc.
- **Difficulty concentrating.** It can be useful here to take a short break, we may do a short mindful activity, attend to or postpone our worry (depending on if it is real or hypothetical) or having a snack or drink before returning to the original activity.
- **Difficulty sleeping.** Having a regular sleep routine can help here as can doing wind down and relaxing activities before bed. This could include having a relaxing bath, having a hot milky drink (decaffeinated) or a tea such as chamomile, reading a relaxing book or using a relaxing bed time meditation. Lavender oil and ‘sleep sprays’ which contain relaxing oils and can be

sprayed onto your pillow can also be useful to help us relax. If we really can not sleep sometimes it can be useful to get up for 30mins and do a calming activity before trying again rather than lying in bed worrying about the fact we can't sleep!

- **Feeling easily fatigued or easily tired.** Worrying all the time is exhausting . It can be much more useful to show ourselves some kindness and compassion rather than beating ourselves up for the things we feel we ought to be achieving. This might take the form of taking regular breaks from the activity to do something nice such as eating a favourite food or speaking to a friend or loved one on the phone before returning to the original activity feeling (hopefully) a little more refreshed.

I have included in this pack a body drawing activity sheet to help you and your children identify and become more aware of how stress and worry can effect the body. This may also help start conversations about worrying and be able to share how they feel, see how others feel and hopefully find some reassurance. If we are aware of how these things impact us we can do more to help ourselves manage our worries and their effects.

* If your child is struggling with the situation and is behaving in ways that are unusual it might be worth trying to meet that behaviour with curiosity. This may take the form of wondering aloud about the underlying feelings of the behaviour rather than taking it at face value and getting cross/ frustrated/ worried etc. the dialogue might go something like this;

‘I have seen you doing X I wonder if this is because you are feeling worried/ afraid/ angry etc about all the changes which are happening/ all the reports of death on the news/ that you can't go out with your friends etc. It must be really hard to feel like that. Maybe we can think of ways to help you when you feel like this.’ (Worry tree, distraction (something pleasurable and engaging such as playing a game together or doing a joint activity or something creative) ways to get the angry feelings out (such as physical activity). Here are a few ideas;

- punching cushions,
- making a den f to spend time in with special toys - he gets to say who can come in and out,
- tearing up old magazines,
- blowing air into balloons and letting them go, this is the frustrated feelings coming out,
- popping bubble wrap,
- needing play-dough.

- Once calmer this could be followed up with a fun game, such as blowing bubbles, rock, paper, scissors, drawing pizza's on each other's back with different touch for different toppings, throw and catch, hide and seek, hiding objects then the other has to find it.... Sharing joy is essential to healthy frontal lobe brain development.

This can help open conversations up, help us respond to difficult behaviours in a helpful way and give a more attuned response which will help our children to understand their own emotions and responses to them better.

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